

From the Other Side of the Tracks

Julius Lester

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Sometimes it seems that history does, indeed, repeal itself. The mistakes of a radical movement are sometimes repeated several generations later by another radical movement. At other times, a radical movement will repeat its own mistakes within the same generation. Mistakes are, of course, inevitable. They are not bad in and of themselves if the factors which caused the mistakes are recognized and corrected. Ignorance is our greatest enemy. To know what to do, when to do it and why it is being done is the preeminent task at all times. When mistakes are repeated, it is an indication that there is a serious, perhaps fatal, lack of revolutionary consciousness.

Since the enunciation of black power in 1966, the black radical movement has shown itself to be overly media-oriented. In the early spring of 1966 the media turned its blinding glare on blacks, and on Stokely Carmichael in particular. He became the medium through which the feelings of young blacks were articulated. And because of the ever-present television cameras and newspaper reporters, he became more than an instrument of black people. He became an entity in his own right, a public figure, a world personality. If one does not have a fully developed revolutionary consciousness and commitment, this kind of public attention can be dangerous. The human ego is like an insatiable tick. If it is not killed, it can burrow under the layers of the soul and feed upon the man within, gorging itself until there is no man left.

To become a public personality in Western society is to become a prisoner of a media-created image. To become a public personality in a revolutionary society is to become so at one with the people that quite unconsciously they set you in them and you see yourself in them. The West says a "cult of the personality" exists in the figures of Mao and Fidel. That is not true. Revolutionary consciousness and revolutionary commitment have destroyed the ego in Mao and Fidel, and in that destruction, they as men became free. Mao is China. Fidel is Cuba. China is Mao. Cuba is Fidel.

In this society that kind of total submersion of the person into the people and vice-versa is almost impossible if one does not cut himself off from everything except the people. Carmichael's leadership position came not from this kind of total submersion, but from his rhetoric and aggressive image on which the media voraciously gorged itself. Slowly, the rhetoric and the aggressive image began to devour SNCC and Carmichael. The rhetoric replaced program. The image replaced organizing. Sometimes, it even seemed that Carmichael would do whatever was necessary to get the desired response, instead of saying whatever was necessary to build revolutionary consciousness. Words are only a revolutionary tool when they are used toward revolutionary ends. Words must eventually be made manifest in a revolutionary program, organizing and action. That did not happen.

For a year now Carmichael has not used the media to address himself to black people. Partially that was through choice and partially it was because others had come forward to play the same role Carmichael had. With their black berets and Mack leather jackets, the Panthers present a striking image. With their rhetoric of power made manifest with the gun, it is not surprising that their Nielsen rating would be a little higher than Carmichael's. Add to this an official of the organization whose credentials are that of being an ex-convict-rapist-revolutionary who can write, and you face a situation so fraught with dangers that the mind shudders to contemplate them.

From the time of their demonstration in the California state capitol, it was evident that the Panthers (at least on the West Coast) were media-oriented. But one cannot seriously organize a revolutionary movement in the glare of publicity. While the media can help an organization get its message through to hundreds of thousands of people more quickly than could be done in any other way, the media also alerts the enemy before you may be in a position to deal with him. The enemy did not hesitate to move against the Panthers. The front-line Panther leadership is now either in jail or facing a long stretch in jail, and the party itself is having to devote much of its energy to this rather than to becoming a viable black political party.

The Panthers gave us the word "pig." They have preached the necessity of the gun. They, like Carmichael, have become a force, but primarily on the basis of image, rhetoric and Cleaver. Much of this rhetoric has been good. Much of the rhetoric has served to heighten the consciousness of the black radical movement and black people in general. But much of the rhetoric has only been of therapeutic value to those in need of therapy. One can understand said feel the anger which gives rise to the cry of "Free Huey or the sky's the limit!" But on the level of revolutionary strategy it makes little sense. One never tells the enemy what he is going to do. If the Vietnamese had told the French, get out of Vietnam or we will crush you at Dienbienphu, the French would've merely gotten out of Dienbienphu. But the Vietnamese didn't even bother speaking to the French. They spoke to the Vietnamese by sending out cadres into every area where there were Vietnamese and they organized, educated, propagandized and acted.

Cleaver's recent speech, in which he is reported to have called Reagan a faggot and challenged him to a duel, is too reminiscent of Carmichael's calling Johnson a fool. It is difficult to see how such utterances will advance the struggle. Their only value is as entertainment. That, however, is not the business at hand.

The black radical movement is repeating itself. The media extracts personalities from its ranks and gives them enough publicity to make them "leaders." These "leaders" get caught up in the glamour of their own image. "The movement" is advanced for a while because of what these "leaders" articulate, but the point of diminishing returns is soon reached and "the movement" comes to a stop while it yet appears to be in motion. Meanwhile, the enemy sneaks in quietly from the rear and redirects the energy which has been released. He takes the rhetoric and bends it to his ends. He provides a program and money and black power becomes respectable. Meanwhile the "leaders" are denouncing the enemy and the enemy is organizing the people.

History need not repeat itself. Hopefully the next potential black leader will immerse himself totally in the revolutionary process and in so doing, realize that the transmitters of revolution are people organized around a program and strategy. SNCC did it in the South in the early sixties. That, however, is a bit of history which has not repeated itself.

No matter how easy it may seem, one cannot use the media to one's own ends. Whatever gains are made are ultimately illusory. In present-day America the media can be nothing but an enemy of revolution. And it definitely cannot be used as a substitute for revolutionary analysis, theory, program and strategy.



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